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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000524

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUELL)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/03/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: OCTOBER POLITICAL ROUND-UP - FREETOWN

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4(b/d)

11. (U) Summary: This is the first in a series of monthly political reporting cables providing a brief snapshot on notable current events and party politics. Questions about the items listed can be directed to Political/Economic Officer Amy LeMar (lemaran@state.gov). End Summary.

CURRENT EVENTS

12. (C) CORRUPTION - The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) made public its findings regarding procurement irregularities within the Ministry of Energy and Power. The ACC determined that the Ministry failed to comply with procurement laws and regulations when it contracted with Nigerian-based Income Electrix Limited to provide 25MW of power to parts of Freetown on November 23, 2007. The contract was awarded without prior approval from legally authorized institutions, against the advice of the technical group responsible for reviewing the bids, and also contains unfavorable financial terms for the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL). The ACC noted in a report shared with Poloff that there is no evidence that these actions violate the Anti-Corruption Act 2000 (Note: The Anti-Corruption Act 2008 came into force September 1, 2008. End Note.), but recommended that the Minister of Justice terminate the contract immediately. On the defensive in the press, the Minister of Energy is citing lack of knowledge about procurement regulations as reason for the irregularities. She also cited the considerable pressure placed upon her by President Koroma to make good on his campaign promise for electricity throughout Freetown before the end of 2007. Comment: ACC Commissioner Abdul Tejan-Cole followed through on his promise to go after big fish following the passage of the ACC Act 2008. Though the new act has no bearing on this particular investigation, the case has captured the attention of the general public and garnered good press for the ACC. Of particular note is the willingness to investigate one of President Koroma's pet projects, a strong sign that Tejan-Cole, despite his friendship with Koroma - is committed to maintaining the ACC's independence from the Executive Office. End Comment.

13. (C) DEMOLITION OF ILLEGAL STRUCTURES - Illegal structures within the business center of Freetown and along the Lumley Beach were demolished by Sierra Leone Police and the Freetown City Council. The Minister of Tourism and Culture stated that the destroyed buildings did not meet hygiene standards, and, in some cases, were marring the city's scenic views. The government also stated that squatters received ample notification of the demolitions. This action has been met with mixed reviews: some view the move as a sign that the APC government is making a tangible effort to address illegalities, while others believe the demolitions occurred at the behest of larger enterprises better able to line the pockets of decision-makers than the small-scale business owners. Comment: Though motivations are unclear, embassy notes that much of the beach-front property benefiting from

unobstructed views are Chinese-owned. End Comment.

14. (C) COMMISSION OF INQUIRY - The APC government established a Commission of Inquiry to investigate misappropriation of donor funds under the previous SLPP administration. The SLPP promised to cooperate fully with the commission, but claimed it to be a "witch-hunt" that will broaden the political divide in the country. Though the GoSL has made assurances that those called before the Commission will be treated as witnesses, rather than guilty parties, the SLPP continue to question the validity of the Commission as frequently as possible in the press. Comment: The public has shown little interest in the Commission, which is somewhat typical of the Sierra Leonean attitude to let bygones be bygones. The GoSL frequently mentions in meetings with the Ambassador and other embassy staff that the SLPP stole donor funds to the tune of millions of dollars, but has yet to show any proof. It is unclear if this Commission is meant to uncover concrete evidence against the SLPP, or is simply a public relations move to distract the public from APC inaction on particular political promises. If it is the latter, however, only a sensational finding is likely to capture the citizens' attention. End Comment.

15. (C) CABINET SHAKE-UP - The rumored cabinet shake-up, previously expected around the anniversary of the President's inauguration is now more likely to occur before the end of the calendar year. The Minister of Mines and Energy are both rumored for the axe due to allegations of corruption levied against them, while the Minister of Works and Marine Resources have both been accused of poor performance. The Minister of Tourism is reportedly an embarrassment to the

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President due to drunkenness and drug abuse. Public sentiment suggests that Koroma will have to sacrifice several of his Cabinet to demonstrate that he is a strong leader who will not condone corruption or under-performance. Another Minister possibly at risk of removal is the Minister of Information and Communication. In an October 31 meeting, the Minister of Foreign Affairs revealed to Ambassador and Poloff that the Minister has misspoken on a number of occasions, presenting inappropriate or incorrect views on behalf of the President. Further, he has alienated a number of key public and private stakeholders in the sector. Comment: While the key ministers are not rumored for removal, it is still possible that more prominent targets will be identified. The dismissal of the Minister of Mines would be the most significant selection of those currently listed, because of the impact mining concessions have on the national budget. Several recently signed concessions with big companies like African Minerals are rumored to be highly disadvantageous to the GoSL, yet were somehow pushed through for approval. The sacking of the Minister of Energy would also send a strong message about Koroma's commitment to stopping corruption at the highest levels of government. End Comment.

PARTY POLITICS

16. (C) APC - Rumors suggest that the APC are embroiled in a leadership tussle, caused by a faction within the party that seeking to prevent President Koroma from standing for re-election in 2012. The APC Constitution mandates only two consecutive terms as party leader, and Koroma is currently serving his second term. Koroma's supporters have begun lobbying for a change to the party constitution, in part because many believe the APC would have been unsuccessful in the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2007 without him. Many feel his supporters will rule the day. Comment: Koroma is somewhat removed from the APC elders - his Presidential candidacy was built on being a "new breed" of APC politician. Though he has support from many strong leaders within the party, he also has powerful enemies. The Attorney General (AG), for example, challenged his leadership

of the party in court because of his belief that a party up-start should not be rewarded with either the leadership position, or, ultimately, the Presidency. The case was eventually settled out of court, and likely resulted in the AG's seemingly velcro-like hold on a position for which he fails to perform his most basic duties. It is possible that Koroma's detractors are aware of their need of him to potentially hold onto the Presidency in 2012, and are stirring the pot now as a reminder of party discipline. End Comment.

17. (C) SLPP - The official opposition is gearing up for its convention, which is expected to be held before the end of the calendar year. This convention will have tremendous significance, as the party has been without a leader since the loss of the Presidential election in 2007. While the SLPP appeared rudderless prior to and after the local elections in July, it has recently rallied to be a more unified, effective mouthpiece against the APC government. Focusing on the cocaine trial, high cost of living, and Income Electrix scandal (see para. 2), the SLPP's current political strategy is to simply highlight perceived mistakes made by the government, rather than offer their own ideas for solutions. The SLPP radio station, Unity Radio, is gaining popularity in Freetown. Comment: The leadership race for the SLPP is currently too close to call, but the frontrunner appears to be John Benjamin, who was Kabbah's Minister of Finance. Benajamin is dogged by rumors of corruption during his days as Minister, but is nevertheless considered a safe choice by party elders. End Comment.

18. (C) People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) - The recent defection of a senior party member, Moijue Kai-Kai, to the APC has left the party in further disarray. The PMDC's poor showing in the July local elections created an internal rift, with blame for their failures frequently levied at top party officials. Comment: The PMDC splintered from the SLPP, but sided with the APC in the Presidential run-off elections. This defection, one of several in recent weeks to the APC, is an indicator that the APC will absorb PMDC members if the party falls apart. End comment.
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